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ABSTRACT

The question of what it means to be a man or woman as one moves through life was explored through a series of interviews with 28 grandparents who all lived in eastern Scotland. They ranged in age from 50 to nearly 80 and ranged in background from deprived to wealthy. The interviewees were asked to reflect on the historical changes that had occurred during their lifetimes and on being a man or woman in later life. Most interviewees welcomed the erosion of gender divisions and the loosening of gender stereotypes. Only a few women longed for the days when the private world of the family was more exclusively their responsibility. Although nearly all the women had some paid work experience and mentioned the personal gains from having a paid job, the key sense of worth for many of them still lay in the private world of the home. The men did not generally place as much significance on the home, and they generally received a sense of self-worth through employment that persisted into their retirement years. Many of the people leading the fullest lives were no longer living in marriages. (Contains 17 references.) (MN)

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OCCASIONAL PAPERS SERIES: NO 8

OLDER WOMEN, OLDER MEN. THE FINDINGS OF A SMALL-SCALE STUDY INTO GENDER ISSUES IN LATER LIFE.

DR CAROLINE BAMFORD

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MARCH 1996

Older women, older men.
The findings of a small-scale study into gender issues in later life.

Caroline Bamford

FOREWORD

For the first time, the majority of children are now able to get to know their grandfather (and vice versa); up until recent decades many men died before all their grandchildren were born. Also for the first time, older women and their partners can live together through an extended period of freedom from work and childcare responsibilities (although older women are often still caring for other relatives). These developments allow researchers such as Caroline Bamford to explore the different experiences older people have had, and are now having, in regard to gender identities and the various aspects of gender roles.

One of the things that stands out in this paper is the importance of time and space. A consequence of changing patterns of work and retirement is the range of older people with sufficient spare time to talk to Bamford about their lives, during which most have had opportunities to *reflect* on developments. They have had the space to stand back a little and look at their relationships – with their partner, their parents and grandparents, their children and grandchildren, and also their relationship with work. What emerges from this paper as one of the biggest long-term changes appears to be in regard to the way women and men are *thinking* about their roles, and beginning to make more *conscious* choices – whether to stay married, for example, or whether to try and develop traits and interests conventionally belonging to the other sex.

Another strong theme in this paper (and one rarely acknowledged outside of women's development courses) is, as Bamford neatly puts it, that 'Self-confidence is a thing very few women take for granted'. One has a sense of the women in this study questioning themselves and their roles more than did the men, who, for the most part, 'through employment... were given a sense of self-worth', and who tried to maintain this by setting up a series of achievable goals and tasks in retirement. Adult educators often ask themselves why so many more older women than men come to courses. It could be precisely this sense of questioning, this lack of certainty, that makes women more open to learning, together with a desire to experience what it is to be outgoing, and to feel part of a diverse 'team'.

This is an interesting time to study conscious gender cross-over in later life as young people and adults increasingly seek to escape the straightjacket of traditional gender stereotypes – sometimes falling into new stereotypes in the process, such as 'the career woman' or 'the house husband'. How fascinating it would be in fifty years time to interview some of those growing up today about their experiences of changing gender identities.

Anne Marie Bostyn (on behalf of the Editorial Committee)

CAROLINE BAMFORD

Caroline Bamford is a freelance writer and researcher, specialising in equal opportunities, children's issues, and lifelong learning. She carried out the research for this article while working as a research fellow in the Centre for Continuing Education at The University of Edinburgh.

Older women, older men.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Older men and women are, in many ways, pioneers. Today, there may be decades of active life after children have grown up and after retirement from paid work – decades that people in previous centuries seldom had. These are years in which the demands, restrictions and routines of earlier years have often eased or indeed ended, and in which the future may feel less charted than at any other time.

This paper explores one central theme – the theme of gender. Growing up when the expectations for boys and girls were more clear cut, and living as adults through a time of enormous changes in how men and women live, older people are uniquely placed to comment on the salience of gender in their own and their children's lives.

Drawing on life-history interviews, this paper explores older people's perceptions of what it means to be a man or a woman as they move through life, and considers whether the less charted years of later life may be a time of personal change.

2. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Despite the considerable interest that there is in the broad field of gender studies, it remains an area that is under-researched. A recent review of research into gender equality issues in Scotland highlights the limited scope and depth of published research. (See Brown et al, 1994.) Gender issues in later life have been barely touched on.

Looking beyond Scotland, research into gender roles in later life has begun to chart the ways that gender structures older people's experiences. (Allen, 1988; Arber and Ginn, 1991; Evers, 1984; Groves, 1991; Mason, 1987; Peace, 1986; Szinivacz, 1982.) Research has found both that older people continue in patterns of gender-typed behaviour which they had established in earlier years, and that gender roles may become less sharply defined as some of the material factors which shaped them – paid employment; parenthood – cease to structure people's lives. (Allen, 1988; Fennel et al., 1988; Mason, 1987, 1988; Thompson et al., 1991; Young and Schuller, 1991.)

There is very little research into gender identity and ageing. Authors such as Itzin (1984) and Sontag (1975) have written about the cultural belief that 'femininity' and 'youthfulness' go hand in hand. Others have suggested that the tough image of masculinity may soften with age.

One study, by the American psychologist and anthropologist David Gutmann, had particular influence on the research reported here. Gutmann devised psychological tests to measure whether men in later life did indeed become less aggressive and more passive with the passing of the years. Using cards with drawings of people in different situations, he asked respondents of different ages, and from very different cultural backgrounds, to tell

the story that the card evoked. Their stories were treated as summing up how his respondents felt about the kinds of situations in real-life that the cards portrayed.

Gutmann argued from his findings that older men are more likely to be passive than younger men are, and that their passivity increases with the passing of the years. For women, he suggested, this process may happen in reverse, so that older men and older women become more similar than they were in their younger days.

Gutmann's research provided something of a theoretical backdrop to this study. Could such a view be explored, not by looking at picture cards, but by asking older women and men about their past and present lives? How would they reflect on the significance of parenthood and employment in the past, and on grandparenthood and retirement in the present? How would they describe the changes that growing older has brought, both to the roles they perform, and to their sense of themselves?

3. RESEARCH METHOD

In order to try and gain insight into the personal dimensions of age and gender, we decided to carry out life-history interviews using semi-structured questions organised around particular themes.[1] The questions – about childhood, employment, marriage, parenthood, retirement, grandparenthood, and age itself – fell loosely into the two broad, and inter-related, categories of the public and the private spheres. They produced some very rich data, as people talked, with feeling, about their past, present and future lives.

Because of the very personal nature of the interview questions, it was important to take special care to respect the privacy and dignity of interviewees. Each interviewee was sent a family questionnaire in advance so that we would not interrupt the interview to keep track of who was who. They were offered tapes of the interview. (Many took the offer up.) They were sent verbatim quotes to check and amend for publication, and pseudonyms for approval.

We interviewed 28 people, all grandparents, who varied in age from around 50 to nearly 80. This range, from people just entering later life, to people who were much older, gave variety in the life changes that people were living through. Choosing grandparents meant that it was possible to compare being a mother or father to being a grandmother or grandfather, adding an extra dimension to reflections on how caring roles and relationships have changed.

The interviews were tape-recorded and partially transcribed. Interviewees were selected through pre-retirement classes and through health visitors. They all live in the East of Scotland (although not all are Scottish born), and none belong to ethnic minority groups. Their backgrounds range from deprived to wealthy, and they have widely differing financial resources today.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

While it would be unwise to draw any hard and fast conclusions from the interviews we did (not least because the study was so small) they do show something of the changing impact of being a man or woman as people move through life. And although no neat theory can be fitted around the experiences they describe, they show both continuities and shifts in gender roles and gender identities in later life (see Bamford 1994).

REFLECTIONS ON HISTORICAL CHANGE

The historical backdrop to this study is the enormous change in gender divisions that this century has seen. The people we interviewed have lived through a time of considerable change in what it means to be a man or a woman, so that how they live today is very different from the lives that their grandmothers and grandfathers led before the Second World War.

Often, historical changes in the lives of men and women were brought up by the people we spoke to, as they compared their lives with those of their parents and grandparents, and their children's lives with their own. The welcome they gave to the erosion of gender divisions and the loosening of gender stereotypes was most wholehearted by, and for, men. No-one spoke out for the patriarchal father and grandfather of old - he was recalled as a forbidding, and, often, unhappy figure. Some people painted this figure more severely for being Scottish, and referred to the damaging influence that Calvinism has had not only on men, but on women too. 'Look at what you've escaped' joked one man as he described the burden placed on his grandmother by the strict division of labour in his grandparents' home. 'John Knox and my mother have a lot to answer for' quipped another. These men welcomed change wholeheartedly, for women, but also for themselves. They talked of the greater personal freedoms that they are able to enjoy - the freedom to explore and develop their own characters and emotions, and the opportunity to be close to their grandchildren.

None of the men we interviewed painted themselves as the patriarchal father or husband. Many looked back with gratitude on the support their wives had given them, and the domestic work their wives had done over the long years when their children lived at home. For some, this gratitude was tinged with a measure of guilt for not doing more, and regret at missing much of their children's early years. Several now felt able, especially if they had retired, to spend more time in the company of their families and to offer more help with household tasks.

The women in this study were mixed in their reactions to changes in women's lives. One or two argued that women's lives were better in the days when the private world of

the family was more exclusively their responsibility, and they talked of the pressure that women (and children) are under in today's world. Concerns of this kind were underpinned by concern at the fragility of modern marriages more, I felt, than at what women may have lost. And, with the high incidence of divorce, many more women talked of the importance they placed on their daughters having some kind of training, enabling them to earn money in their own right.

Women, unlike men, have no such easy historical image of the mother of old to set up and then knock down. Images of women as mothers, and indeed as wives, are typically too idealised to be so easily rejected. They are also far removed from the real work that being a mother and running a home involves. One woman, Dorothy, spoke of how the Virgin Mary was always held up as the perfect mother, but of how she had felt that she was too perfect, too gentle and docile to be real. Their own mothers were also remembered as flesh and blood characters rather than ideal images, and some had very unhappy memories of their mothers in their childhood years.

Women talked less about the ideal images that may influence them, and more about how they coped with the changing realities of their day-to-day lives. But coping was made harder, I feel, because of the social taboo against talking about the very realities that the idealised mother obscures. Helen described how women, when her children were young in the 1960s, did not talk about how they were coping.

> Nobody talked. You were expected to conform. No matter how you were feeling, that wasn't taken into account. You were expected to be the same. There was just no excuses given for you for anything.

Other women argued against the talking and introspection that is more acceptable today. They spoke, with some pride, of how they survived hard times, and of how not discussing how they felt helped them to keep their strength up.

Women's, and men's, comments about social changes for women were mainly focused on the greater opportunities that women now enjoy. Several men, looking back on how their wives had lived, spoke of feeling sad that they had missed the opportunity to pursue a career. Several women also wished that today's opportunities had been theirs, and they described the kinds of careers that they would have liked to pursue. Anne, for example, spoke particularly bitterly of how she feels she has been undersold at work, and of her disappointment that gender differences have so structured her life. Margaret, who spent long years in a clerical job she disliked, told of how she was born too soon to have the chance to return to education and train to be a teacher. Jane, who had worked as a housekeeper, described how she would have liked to be a teacher, and Mary, who worked as a clerk, would have chosen accountancy.

These personal regrets that modern opportunities were denied them are very telling, I feel, about attitudes to the wider opportunities that women now enjoy. Telling too are the hopes that many had for their daughters, and the practical help that several were giving – especially with childcare – so that their daughters could continue in their careers.

BEING A WOMAN IN LATER LIFE

Although they had very limited choice in the jobs open to them, nearly all of the women in this study did return to paid work, and have retired, or will retire. Many described personal gains from having a paid job. Janet, for example, spoke of how returning to work gave her the personal courage, as well as the financial means, to leave a desperately unhappy marriage. Elizabeth spoke of how having a responsible job helped her through difficult years. Jean spoke of how having a income of her own gave her power in her marriage, and Ivy spoke of the feelings of fulfilment that her job has fostered in her. Meeting people of different ages, with different views; finding out about different lives; seeing how others deal with personal problems; simply coping with the combined pressures of home and work; and having the chance to make changes in their lives through retiring were all benefits that employment gave and which the older women found had endured over the years.

Having had a public life, these women did not return to spending all their time in the home, or on family concerns, unless the needs of family members dictated that they should. Many went to classes, or worked as volunteers, or kept up their contacts with friends. Perhaps, to use a phrase from the American author Adrienne Rich, they had, through working, found selves of their own to return to; or perhaps, more simply, they had found that they enjoyed being out and about on their own.

These women, even if they had had a paid job, continued to be the carers in their families. The time they spent looking after others depended on the changing needs of family members, and could vary from year to year as well, of course, as for person to person. The often unpredictable demands that family members may make on women in later life – an elderly relative, or husband, becoming unwell and in need of care; a child who needs to return home; a grandchild who needs to be looked after – mean that many women have little chance to lead a freer life in their later years. And, whether or not they enjoy much free time, being caring was a large part of the people they felt they were.

For many of the women here, their key sense of being of worth, their definition of who they are in the world, lies, in very large part still, in the private world of the home. Their lives in the home are affected by what they have done outside it, but it is through their relationships, particularly with their children, that women talked of feeling 'of use'. They talked of how they wished, always, to be there for their children, and of their

constant adjustments to the different and changing needs of their children in adulthood. They talked of putting work into being a good mother still – often, looking after grandchildren was done with this, first relationship in mind. Many described their efforts to keep in touch with their families – of their efforts to be 'kin-keepers', to use an American phrase. Some talked with pleasure, some with concern and regret, but they were all deeply engaged with their families' lives.

One – Mary – described how she felt that she had been living through her daughter as she encouraged her to build her career. And one – Ivy – talked of feeling at risk that, after retiring from her career, she would slip into living through her daughters too. This tension in women's lives, between living through other people, and living for themselves, is seldom felt in such stark terms. For a start, being a caring person is so integral to feminine identity that independence and dependence are in no easy conflict with each other. Jane, for example, remembered the years when her children needed her full-time care with real longing, and she lapsed into the present tense when describing her life then.

This feeling of being of use, through caring, was one which several women used to judge their own personal value, and which signified that they were not yet truly old. Several women described their fear about being no longer able to care for themselves. Seldom cared for by others, perhaps women feel less at ease than men do about others caring for them in old age. They talked of their worry that they would be a burden on others, of how 'losing your independence must be the worst thing that can happen'. I feel there is a unhappy paradox here, for if much of women's sense of self-worth is derived from caring for others, it is sad indeed if they regard as burdensome that same caring work being done for them.

That being of use through caring is bound up with a sense of self-worth also shows, I feel, something of the complex nature of another personal quality that has often proved all too elusive in women's lives. Self-confidence is something very few women take for granted, and shifting feelings of confidence and unconfidence coloured the life stories these women told us. Setting up a home on marriage; carrying on through difficult times; returning to a paid job; and learning new skills through classes or as a volunteer were all described as boosting confidence. Marriage, family tensions and an undemanding job were also described as undermining it. Confidence did perhaps seem more assured in later life, and yet some of the women's accounts of widowhood also show how it may not hold up in times of greatest need.

Women's dependence within marriage is complex too. Many referred to their unhappiness over financial dependence when talking about inequality in their married lives. But another dependence – emotional dependence – was only rarely raised. Some women did talk of the things their husband's allow them to do. Anne talked, with some bitterness, of being 'answerable' to her husband still. Women also talked of the changes they had made in their marriages – changes towards financial independence, towards greater sharing of domestic

tasks, in any social life they lead, and, indeed, in their husband's use of time after they retire.

BEING A MAN IN LATER LIFE

The home, and the caring that is done there, did not carry the same significance in the stories the men had to tell. While many were happy to spend time at home, to help with tasks, to participate in family events, and to be in the company of their wives, they don't talk of home life or family relationships as giving them a sense of being 'of use'. Where this phrase *was* used, by some, was when talking, regretfully, of retirement, with its implication that they were no longer needed or of value. 'It's a terrible thing for a man to be no further use, and a woman too I suppose', said William. 'Oh, I'm not really wanted at all' was the way that being accepted for retirement had made Richard feel.

Through employment, many of these men were given a sense of self-worth that, despite their first reactions, lived on into their retirement years. Having had a professional identity - having been 'a banker', 'a solicitor', 'a teacher', 'a scientist' gave them, I feel, an enduring sense of worth and identity even if they looked back, from time to time, with wistfulness, or regret, or anger, at the power and status they had lost. It was not only professional men who equated employment with being of value. William, who was medically retired from a job as a hospital storekeeper, felt it too, and another described how useless his redundancies have made him feel. Being able to describe his most recent redundancy as retirement came as something of a relief to Michael who was unhappy in several of the jobs he has done.

Many men also enjoy higher pensions than women, enabling them to continue to be the main provider even in retirement. But they no longer need to go out to do this, and several gave the impression that they saw their homes as the places that they were retiring *to*. Their descriptions of the time they spent there were often peppered with lists of the tasks they did and the hobbies they had taken up – home, for them, felt less imbued with the family relationships and concerns that the women described. Indeed several of the men, through their hobbies, and the other ways they spent their time, had set up goals that they wished to achieve. Perhaps they were setting up new 'jobs' to replace the one they no longer did; certainly the (self-imposed) discipline of a goal helped to give structure to their day-to-day lives.

While the men did talk more of goals and tasks, it is important not to underplay the significance of family relationships in their lives. For all that they felt that they were less central than their wives in their children's lives; for all that they relied on their wives to keep in touch with children and grandchildren; for all that their main contribution, as provider, had kept them away from the people they were providing for, they were all, still, family men.

The retired men we interviewed reacted in different ways now that they have more time to spend in the company of their families. Several did talk of their belief in their children's independence, and argued that they should not be too central in their children's and grandchildren's lives. Others though wished to make up for the time they had missed when their children were younger, and they were making the most of the opportunity to be close to their grandchildren now.

Several talked of themselves and their wives as a team, and they described their shared interest in and concerns for their children. This meant, I think, that they felt involved even if it was their wife who was the one who kept in touch – who was the kin-keeper – since, in their view, she did this for them both. Nonetheless, being at one remove from their children must carry some psychological significance – a feeling perhaps of being less bound by the family, or less defined by it, or even less to blame if things go wrong, (or less deserving of credit if things turn out well).

Several of these men were retrospectively grateful to their wives for the caring they have done, and the support they have given, over the years. And they didn't talk as several of the women did, of their fear of dependence in the future, perhaps because being cared for and supported were accepted features of their day-to-day lives. Nonetheless, these men, like the women, were aware of changing social norms in the part that men play in caring for children and the home. Some talked of doing more in the home on retirement, and emphasised the distance they had travelled from their grandfather's day. But others talked of the need to be sensitive to their wives' feelings, and of not heedlessly taking over the tasks their wives have always done.

While the women we interviewed talked of how their shifting feelings of confidence and unconfidence have coloured their lives over the years, men only raised it when an external change, such as redundancy or retirement, had thrown them. Lack of self-confidence has been a problem that women have admitted for ages past, but, for whatever reason, it has seldom been acknowledged as problematic for, or by, men. Certainly my sense, from these interviews, is of men who haven't been held back by low self-esteem. I felt very conscious too that a feeling of personal autonomy was a thread that ran through their lives, even though, for many, that autonomy relied on their wives' support.

5. CONCLUSION

CHANGE AND LATER LIFE

Several of the people who were leading the fullest lives, people who were furthest from any stereotypes of how men and women are or should be, were people who were no longer living in marriages, and who had learnt to rely on themselves. William, a widower,

spoke of the enormous pleasure that his granddaughters' company gives him. Dorothy, a widow, described how she was embarking on a voyage of personal discovery, in which she hoped to find out who *Dorothy* was after many years of caring for others. Mildred and Joe both described their enthusiasm for their independent lives.

Their stories, and others too, lead me to the conclusion that it is circumstances, and not any innate psychological process, which enable some men and women to embrace personal qualities with an unmanly or unfeminine label. It would also seem, from the stories that people told us, that the freedom to try new things can bring considerable rewards. The tragedy is that, for so many older men and women in our society, the odds against this kind of experimentation are stacked so very high. Poor health, poverty and the restricted opportunities open to many older people are barriers which are hard to overcome.

Yet, even in this less than favourable context, where being old is often thought of as a state to avoid, all is not bleak. Age is a resource as well as a handicap. People tackle the problems and challenges of the present by drawing on what they have learned from their younger lives. For many of the people we interviewed, coping with difficult times, and, indeed, making the most of a new experience – being retired or becoming a grandparent – was greatly helped by the knowledge, skills and experience they had built up over the years.

Here, past as well as present patterns of gender are crucial. The women I spoke to had gained from an automous public life, from experience of paid or voluntary work, as well as from being carers. Men had gained from what family life had given them, as well as from the skills they had learnt at work. Conversely, if the division between the 'female' world of the home and the 'male' world of work had been too sharp, then it was more difficult for either women or men to become more rounded people, and thus to lead more satisfying lives, in their later years. Erosion of the divisions between women's sphere and men's, between the private and the public, is vital to a fulfilling life in later years. But to leave that erosion to those later years, to the effects of the supposedly natural processes of ageing, is to leave it dangerously late.

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